Traders in Ancient Japan

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Research undertaken to date on trade in ancient Japan has concentrated on bringing to light information on traders, the activities of markets, legal restrictions, and the trading activities of public offices and officials. Consequently, the motives and objectives for trading have not necessarily been pursued in these studies. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to explore the circumstances of traders and categories thereof, making use of the classifications for the motives and objectives of traders that have been established by Karl Polanyi.

First, following Polanyi's guidelines and a comprehensive analysis of motives in ancient Japan, I found that there were a great many traders who were engaged in trade for the purpose of acquiring products from outside their own regions. In contrast, I found that traders who pursued profit were few in number and that they also had a low social standing. Accordingly, it is evident that in terms of the total number of traders, the vast majority consisted of those involved in trade for the purpose of acquisition.

Next, this study also revealed that trade by public offices, the imperial household, and the aristocracy was fundamentally acquisition-oriented. Merchandising activities by the aristocracy were also conducted for the purpose of supplying money required for the running of their households. Powerful families from outlying regions who traded in central areas also did so not out of the pursuit of profit, but for the purpose of acquiring commodities they were not able to obtain locally. It was for this reason that trading bases for gathering products from around the Japanese archipelago and from overseas were established in Kyoto and Naniwa. This paper shows that these people acquired money for achieving a rank that would indicate their authority and for the purpose of obtaining money.

In the last section of the study, I examine merchants who traded for the purpose of making a profit. Although in numerical terms the increase in merchants who traded in markets and traveling merchants who covered short distances was accompanied by the development of a consumption economy, the business entities of the vast majority of these merchants remained small in scale. However, by the end of the Heian period, there began to emerge merchants trading over long distances who developed substantial trading activities. These merchants established their businesses by partially substituting the acquisition-oriented trade structure that had been developed by the aristocracy, which they subsequently developed with great success.